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ABSTRACT

In recent years there have been a few systematic attempts to restructure social psychology in which all have concurred that there is a dearth of provocative and meaningful theoretical contributions in contemporary social psychology. Current theories are unnecessarily limited in scope. These theories are fragmented, have limited implications, lack a common framework, and fail to explicate underlying assumptive bases. Contemporary social psychological theorizing is dominated by the practice of working with theories (verification) instead of working on theories (explanation). Whereas the former practice casts theory in a role secondary to data collection by neglecting extrascientific influences, the latter incorporates sociohistorical determinants thereby elevating theory to a position of fundamental importance in the description of social life. Consequences of continued allegiance to working with theories include lack of applicability to everyday life, an overemphasis on variables, and the neglect of meaning. The solution is not to end experiments or the hypothetico-deductive method, but to offset the relative inattention paid to theoretical endeavors. Working on theories will require a major shift in the primary activities of many persons engaged in social psychological research which will engender a flexibility that will contribute to an enriched understanding of social life. (An extensive reference list is included.)
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Working With Versus Working On Theories in Social Psychology

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Working With Versus Working On Theories

Abstract

The contemporary trend to use social psychological theory in the service of verification (working with theories) is contrasted to theory utilized in the service of explanation (working on theories). Whereas the former practice casts theory in a role secondary to data collection by neglecting extrascientific influences, the latter incorporates sociohistorical determinants thereby elevating theory to a position of fundamental importance in the description of social life. Consequences of continued allegiance to working with theories include lack of applicability to everyday life, an overemphasis on variables and the neglect of meaning.

Working With Versus Working On Theories in Social Psychology

In recent years social psychologists have initiated a critical scrutiny of their own scholarly activities. Among concerns expressed have been the relationship between science and history (Gergen, 1973; 1976), the effects of society on knowledge (Buss, 1975), and the role of underlying epistemological assumptions (Rappoport, 1977). A related yet different issue emerging from this self-analysis is the sentiment that a higher priority has been placed on matters of technique and methodology than on developing rich, integrative theory. A precursor of this viewpoint can be found in Ring's (1967) lament about the "fun and games" approach that has dominated research in social psychology. More recently, Moscovici (1972) argues that social psychology has relied too heavily on the predictive function of theories at the expense of developing explanatory systems. In a similar vein, Sherif (1977) contends that we have "put the cart before the horse" by reversing priorities such that matters of technique take precedence over matters of substance. Tapp (1980) criticizes the contemporary literature on social problems as consisting of simplistic, fragmented and atheoretical studies that have advanced technology at the expense of theory. More generally, Silverman (1977) characterizes contemporary debates among social psychologists as focused on procedural technicalities rather than on substantive issues of either a theoretical or practical nature. Finally, Gergen (1978b) has depicted much of our research efforts as being preoccupied with hypothesis testing

in lieu of theory building.

In recent years there have been a few systematic attempts to restructure social psychology (cf., Armistead, 1974; Ginsburg, 1979a; Harré & Secord, 1972; Strickland, Aboud, & Gergen, 1976) and, despite differences in perspective, all have concurred that there is a dearth of provocative and meaningful theoretical contributions in contemporary social psychology. Given this growing consensus, the purpose of the present paper will be to explicate more thoroughly the imbalance between method and theory that currently marks the discipline.

Before developing our thesis further, we wish to make two preliminary observations. First, the contention that there is too little theoretical work is not meant to characterize the contributions of all social psychologists. However, evidence available in the public documents that constitute the field reveals the low priority placed on theoretical matters and it is to this state of affairs that the present arguments are directed. Second, the assertion that there has been insufficient attention paid to theory does not mean that there are few theories in social psychology. Indeed, there are many theories. However, current theories are unnecessarily limited in scope in that they are either parsimonious sets of a few simple principles addressed to a small range of phenomena, or they are focused on specific variables that pertain to a particular behavior. Examples of the former include McGuire's (1964) innoculation theory, Brehm's (1966) reactance theory, and Lerner's (1970) just world theory and have been variously referred to as theories of the middle range

(Merton, 1957), microtheories (McGuire, 1966) or miniature theories (Hendrick, 1977). Instances of the latter include Hovland, Janis, and Kelley's (1953) persuasion theory, Berscheid and Walster's (1974) physical attractiveness theory, and Zajonc's (1965) social facilitation theory. Moscovici (1972) has termed this procedure taxonomic theorizing.

Although each of these approaches has been useful in stimulating research and providing alternative interpretations of social phenomena, one cannot help but be aware of their fragmented state, limited implications, lack of common framework or orientation, and failure to explicate underlying assumptive bases. It is our contention that the sterility of much social psychological theorizing stems from the fact that most of the creative thinking regarding theories has been dominated by concerns about data and procedures that surround the data collection process. To clarify this viewpoint we propose a distinction between "working with" theories, whereby the primary objective is verification of hypotheses, and "working on" theories, in which major emphasis is placed on the explanation of phenomena. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to articulating the differences between these two approaches and considering the implications of each.

"Working With" Theories

Contemporary social psychological theorizing is dominated by the practice of "working with" theories within the context of the traditional hypothetico-deductive method. The process begins with the observation of facts that suggest a theoretical principle to serve as an explanation.

Following this, a hypothesis is deduced that would be logically expected were the theory true. This hypothesis is submitted to one or more of several verification procedures, typically the laboratory experiment, to determine if the newly obtained facts corroborate the original hypothesis. If not, the hypothesis is rejected and the theory is falsified. This is, of course, ideal and seldom obtains in practice. Nonetheless, our point is that theory used in this manner is most often treated as a means to a particular end, viz, verification, instead of as a vehicle intended to serve multiple goals with verification being only one of them.

Rather than working directly on theory, such as considering how a theory may be implied by a prior social context, creative investment is diverted to adjuncts to theory such as operationalization of variables, choosing a verification procedure, and eliminating confounds. Those few cases where the theory itself is addressed typically occur indirectly, that is, when the data do not support the hypothesis. In such instances the theory is usually amended in light of the new findings. Ironically these theoretical endeavors may render the theory useless since if all positive outcomes are taken as support and all negative outcomes lead to revisions of the theory, the theory is unfalsifiable. Continued allegiance to these procedures sacrifices the potential richness of theoretical controversy insofar as debates in this context hinge on questions of alternative explanation and serve primarily as an impetus to stimulate new research to establish new facts and thus initiate a new round of the hypothetico-deductive cycle.

Consequences of "Working With" Theories

Inapplicability to Everyday Life

Numerous consequences of the tendency to "work with" theories merit consideration. First, this practice has contributed to the sentiment that social psychology has failed to say much that is meaningful about everyday life. In large measure this is so because social psychologists have relied too often on common sense as the basis for social theories. This trend has produced what Moscovici (1972) has termed, "the social psychology of aphorisms." As a result, the literature is filled with experiments whose purpose is to shed light on something akin to whether "birds of a feather flock together," or "opposites attract." To the extent social psychologists conduct numerous such experiments, they open themselves to the criticism of banality and, more importantly, focus attention on the discovery of situational factors that facilitate or inhibit the occurrence of common sense phenomena. As Moscovici (1972) reminds us it is a misuse of experimental methods when we apply them repeatedly only to rediscover what is obvious or, at best, to catalogue when what is obvious will or will not occur.

A related point is made by Gergen (1978a, 1978b) who contends that there is an *a priori* truth to most social hypotheses, insofar as theories that are derived from people's common conceptions of the world may be endowed with truth value without regard to empirical test. That is, if we assume that people's conduct reflects the common sense concepts prevalent in their cultures, then theories that are inspired by these

concepts are obviously verifiable. Thus, the dependence on common sense eviscerates the experiment to little more than a demonstration of culturally accepted truths, thereby undermining its potential usefulness in the discovery of new knowledge.

Ironically, by focusing on the eliciting conditions of common sense a social psychology emerges that is largely inapplicable to everyday life. Concepts of fundamental concern in daily life have been, for the most part, neglected by social psychology. These include notions such as justice, volition, trust, morality and the like. To be sure, we have specific theories that incorporate these or related concepts such as Lerner's (1970, 1975) well-known work on justice, Walster and her colleagues' formulation of equity theory (Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973; Walster, Walster, and Berscheid, 1977), Deutsch's (1962, 1977) work on trust and the literature on responsibility attribution (e.g., Shaw & Sulzer, 1964; Walster, 1966), but in each case the focus is not on understanding these concepts but rather on collecting data to verify hypotheses that incorporate these concepts. As an example, dissonance theory incorporates volition as a necessary condition for the arrousal of dissonance, but this fails to inform us about volition so much as it enables us to predict more reliably certain consequences alleged to follow from the arousal of dissonance. In a like fashion, most of the work on attribution of responsibility has neglected the problem of what is meant by responsibility and has instead focused on a range of independent variables that are thought to affect judgments of responsibility.

This type of research tells us nothing about what people mean by responsibility assignment and how they use it in everyday life to affect their outcomes. Indeed, most criticisms of this literature point out this lack of concern with meaning (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1973; Vidmar & Crinklaw, 1974). It seems apparent that the primary concern of research conducted in the foregoing manner is to verify hypotheses rather than to understand phenomena. Unfortunately, this preoccupation with predictive utility comes at the expense of in-depth analyses whereby links among socio-psychological processes can be established and consequences of the theory for a model of humankind can be examined.

Overemphasis on Variables

A second consequence of "working with" theories has been an inclination to overemphasize variables per se, insofar as the researchers' foremost concerns have centered on operationalization, manipulation, measurement and control of relevant variables. As a result, much research has been preoccupied with determining what combination of variables needs to be present or controlled to obtain the phenomenon predicted by a theory. An example is the reverse incentive effect deduced from dissonance theory, whereby subjects who are paid little to lie may be expected to believe their own lie more than subjects who are paid a lot. During the 1960's and into the 1970's, a sizable literature emerged attempting to pin down the exact combination of variables necessary to produce such an effect. In following this type of procedure, the focus of research shifted away from the theory itself and toward the phenomenon predicted

by the theory. As this example shows, a tendency arises to evaluate theories primarily in terms of their predictive utility and by the many experiments they suggest. Thus, much of the work in designing experiments that ensues from thinking about variables has the effect of extending the range of a theory's application without adding much to the depth of its explanatory power. Returning to the example of dissonance theory, a plethora of experiments did not reveal so much about how dissonance works and why it does as they confirmed what people will do after eating fried grasshoppers, not playing with an attractive toy, or succeeding on a test they expected to fail. Rather than inform us as to why people are motivated by dissonance, as to whether dissonance reduction is socially valued or not, or as to the nature of society that may be anticipated among persons widely concerned with this motivation, these experiments were primarily involved in an attempt to catalogue the situations in which dissonance theory enables the prediction of certain outcomes. As Moscovici (1972) has cautioned, this activity serves a potentially useful archival function, but at the same time, diverts attention away from understanding the theory and its interrelationship with social life.

Neglect of Meaning

A final consequence of "working with" theories is a tendency to ignore the meaning of behavior. This comes about partly because in the service of rigorous methodology, we typically truncate the range of possible responses so that they can be more reliably measured. For example, in

experiments using the prisoner's dilemma game, only a "cooperative" or a "competitive" response is possible; in most attitude change studies, subjects respond by checking a point along a single rating scale; in verbal learning research the experimenter is primarily interested in a narrow class of verbal responses. Other behaviors that might reasonably be expected in such situations are virtually excluded. A consequence is that we may often obtain the predicted behaviors simply because there are no other reasonable options available to the subject. Put differently, by restricting responses a meaning is imposed on the experiment that is the investigator's (operational) meaning and it is assumed that by engaging in the predicted behavior, the subject intends the same meaning. In fact, specifically because responses are so restricted, it is safe to assume that different subjects or even the same subject over trials will mean different things by a given response. It is well known, for example, that the "cooperative" response in a prisoner's dilemma game can be used to mean many things including a desire to cooperate, a need to communicate, an attempt to set up the opponent for subsequent exploitation, and so forth (cf., Apfelbaum, 1974; McClintock, 1972).

Another example is Deutsch and Krauss' (1960, 1962) classic experiments using the trucking game wherein it was found that threats are detrimental to conflict resolution. In a critical analysis of this work, Kelley (1966) pointed out that the response used to indicate threat (lowering a gate) was simultaneously one that delivered punishment. Shomer, Davis, and Kelley (1966) increased the range of possible responses by

separating threats and punishments and found that threats can actually enhance conflict resolution. More recently, Tedeschi, Smith, and Brown (1974) have argued that the frequent practice of operationalizing aggression in terms of shocking a stooge or deprecating a former tormenter ignores the possibility that by engaging in these behaviors, subjects may be reacting to reciprocity or equity norms rather than be expressing harmful intent per se. Hence, by limiting the number of possible responses many different shades of meaning masquerade under one response category that is all too often taken to reflect the operationalized meaning.

"Working On" Theories

By way of summary, the practice of "working with" theories and the attendant premium placed on experimental verification imposes unnecessary constraints that yield an impoverished view of human conduct. In contrast, another approach termed "working on" theories is recommended whereby the theories themselves become the central focus with verification being only one of several goals. In particular, theories are viewed in terms of their relationship to society with primary effort directed toward understanding the sociohistorical context in which the theories became invested with truth. By adopting the procedure of "working on" theories, theories are no longer treated as though they were transhistorical or universally applicable. Rather, they are viewed as the particular truths of a particular sociohistorical viewpoint. They are bounded by historical limits and by the prevalence of certain cultural assumptions. Consequently,

they are embedded in a constantly evolving network of beliefs, values and practices.

Sensitivity to the manner in which theories are shaped by cultural assumptions was first evident in the work of European social psychologists (Armistead, 1974; Israel & Tajfel, 1972) and has become a matter of increasing concern more recently among American investigators (Strickland, 1979; Strickland, Aboud, & Gergen, 1976). Recognizing the importance of this issue, Buss (1975) has called for a "sociology of psychological knowledge," the goal of which would be to explore the political, social, economic and philosophical bases of psychological theories. Similar notions have been advanced by Coan (1973) who recommended the establishment of a "psychology of psychology," and Atwood and Tomkins (1976) who proposed a "psychology of knowledge." Given the widespread acknowledgement of the cultural and historical boundedness of psychological theories, it is suggested that human behavior can be meaningfully understood only to the extent that the origins and consequences of the interrelationship between society and science are explicated.

Awareness of Embeddedness

"Working on" theories involves several related steps. First, is simple awareness of the embeddedness problem. While this may not seem to be a difficult step there nonetheless appears to be considerable resistance to such recognition inasmuch as Buss (1975) has noted that important theoretical issues are commonly debated without acknowledging their underlying social bases. Insensitivity to the embeddedness problem may be

explained partly by the trappings of a scientific career, the goal of expediency in getting grants awarded and research published, as well as by other extrascientific considerations that divert attention from analysis of the underlying foundation of scientific practices. However, much of the neglect arises from the prominence of a neo-positivist epistemology that argues that the facts of scientific observation are insulated from cultural intrusions.

While many psychologists still adhere to this notion, Glass and Ellett (1980) point out that most modern social philosophers have abandoned the belief as naive that facts can be independent of values. For example, in discussing the value controversy in contemporary sociology, Foss (1977) indicates that the dominant position of value neutrality has been challenged by several reorientations including a naturalistic-evolutionary view that maintains that scientific facts are determined by values that contribute to both evolution and survival. Within social psychology, the group of British psychologists organized by Nigel Armistead (1974) provide numerous illustrations of the interdependencies among social values and scientific facts.

Analysis of Sociohistorical Context

The second step requires analysis of the determining sociohistorical context. Two approaches have been taken in this regard. The first, advanced most recently by Gergen (1973, 1976) is to analyze the reasons why contemporary theories are affected by sociohistorical context. Gergen argues that social theories are perishable insofar as they are primarily

based on historically changing facts. These facts change because enlightened persons may be motivated to modify their behavior in response to cultural values that stress freedom and individuality, and because social behaviors are the product of learned dispositions that shift over time. Moreover, Gergen adds that the theoretical terms commonly used in psychology are heavily value-laden in that they contain prescriptive biases which mirror contemporary social values. That is, psychological theories not only describe what appears to be, but more subtly, they prescribe what is desirable to be. Hence, while we study authoritarianism, machiavellianism, and dogmatism as well as altruism, self-actualization, and self-esteem, the implicit message is understood by nearly all members of our culture that it is desirable to be low on the former attributes and high on the latter.

The second approach examines the relationship between contemporary theories and specific antecedent social contexts. This approach has been termed "critical history" and has been used by Samelson (1974, 1975) and Baumgardner (1976, 1977) to highlight the economic and political factors that contributed to the development of different perspectives within psychology. For example, Samelson (1974) has reevaluated the contributions of Comte to social psychology and concluded that the ideological components of his position were ignored by contemporary authors in favor of positivist doctrine which was more acceptable to the science of their time. In a similar manner, Baumgardner (1976, 1977) has suggested that the rejection of McDougall's ideas about the role of instincts in behavior was largely

determined by the emergence of a progressive liberalism rather than by the lack of confirmatory evidence. Comparable analyses have been offered by Riegel (1972) in describing the status of developmental psychology and by Kamin (1974) and Buss (1976) in discussing the IQ debates within differential psychology.

Consequences of Embeddedness

The third step in "working on" theories requires an examination of the consequences of contextual embeddedness. One of the more obvious consequences (and one already considered) is that much psychological theory corroborates common sense. Insofar as common sense assumptions in the culture provide a background from which theoretical notions are derived, the self-evident nature of many of our findings is not surprising. Moreover, overreliance on prevailing cultural assumptions serves mostly to legitimize the status quo by endowing it with the respectability of scientific sanction. Thus, in spite of claims to the contrary, social psychology all too often serves a politically conservative constituency rather than an opposition one. This sentiment is echoed in Ring's (1971) observation that traditional social psychological researchers inadvertently ally themselves with conventional institutional power structures that operate in opposition to weaker, less-organized segments of society. Ring's proffered solution to this is a type of "radical social psychology" combining advocacy research with partisan social action.

A byproduct of alignment with the power centers of society is that social psychology virtually excludes alternative ideological perspectives

that depart from the currently accepted value consensus. As an illustration, Sedgwick (1974) points out that the paradigms of modern social psychology lend themselves to both a conservative perspective (e.g., holding minority group members accountable for their disadvantaged status while admonishing them to improve their situation by dint of hard work) and a liberal perspective (e.g., holding society accountable for the disadvantaged status of minority group members and encouraging reformist programs such as Head Start and Fair Housing laws). However, as Sedgwick notes, the paradigms of modern social psychology do not permit the viability of a radical perspective. The radical perspective would, among other things, identify the existing social structure as the source of the disadvantaged status of minority groups and advocate a restructuring of the social order that would end the dominance of one group over others.

Although widespread, the systematic exclusion of alternative perspectives in psychological theory is generally unacknowledged. A noteable exception is Caplan and Nelson's (1973) identification of the "person-blame" bias as a particularly vivid example of this exclusionary tendency. This bias refers to the pervasive view in psychology that individuals, in contrast to situations, are responsible for their problems. By holding this view, the failure of social programs is attributed to target populations rather than to inadequacies in the programs themselves. Moreover, the need for "person-change" rather than "system-change" policies is legitimated and system-oriented criticism is discredited. In serving these functions, Caplan and Nelson conclude that, although not necessarily

intended, "person-blame" interpretations serve the interests of the relatively advantaged segments of society.

Alternative Theoretical Assumptions

The final step in "working on" theories invovles a rigorous consideration of alternative assumptive bases for theoretical explanations including their social, political, and economic implications. A recent attempt in this direction was a symposium on dialectical social psychology chaired by Rappoport (1977). In spite of numerous discussions of dialectical theory (Buss, 1979; Rappoport, 1975; Riegel, 1976), there has not yet emerged a consensual definition of what is meant by a dialectical social psychology. Nonetheless, a core set of assumptions characterizes most thinking in this area. These include the view that persons must be treated as active agents who not only react to but also act upon their environment, as well as the belief that the proper focus of psychological inquiry is on temporally bound, ever-changing processes rather than on ahistorical, static concepts such as states and traits.

Dialectical thinking also eliminates the dualistic distinction between subject and object as illustrated, for example, by the concept of the "science-society dialectic" by which it is acknowledged that neither social developments nor scientific practices can be understood without reference to the other. The purpose of a dialectical social psychology is to describe and understand the social conflicts and apparent paradoxes encountered in everyday life. It focuses on the changing individual in a changing world and it involves a "radical interactionism" (Smith, 1977)

of developmental processes in which it is assumed that people themselves create the environment to which they, in turn, react. Thus, a model emerges in which individuals are simultaneously the cause and effect of their own worlds.

Methodological considerations that arise from this perspective rest on an additional set of assumptions. These include the beliefs that social behavior must be understood in its historical context, that science is more than the accumulation of facts inasmuch as research orientations are influenced by social and/or political motives, and that the popularity of certain ideas may be a function of the ability of individual scientists to attract a following among their colleagues. Cvetkovitch (1977) provides several illustrations of methodological techniques available to the dialectical social psychologist. These include increased use of observational studies, the introduction of historical-longitudinal designs that permit the assessment of developmental and generational trends, and a behavioral census procedure (Elms, 1975) which relies on systematic recording of the frequencies of various social behaviors. By collecting base rate information on the occurrence of different categories of social behaviors, the behavioral census procedure permits an estimation of the relative importance of the social phenomena under investigation. Added to these approaches is the method of dialogues advocated by Riegel (1978) that investigates interaction patterns among interdependent persons each of whom serves as both stimulus and response to the other.

Although the introduction of the dialectical perspective offers a constructive alternative to the positivist-dominated methods currently used by social psychologists, Gergen (1977) has pointed out the difficulties involved in establishing dialectical social psychology on a firm footing. Among reasons why resistance is likely to be encountered are the dialectician's concern with the valuational bases of scientific facts, a tendency to stress theory more than data, a sensitivity to historical developments, and an inclination to use Marxist concepts in theory formulation. Insofar as it is easier to criticize existing approaches than to articulate a viable alternative, Gergen concludes that if dialectics is to be taken seriously, a rationale is required that will demonstrate that dialectics is no more subjective, unverifiable, and ideologically biased than are current approaches.

A somewhat different though related viewpoint, called ethogenics, has been advocated by Harré (Harré, 1977; Harré & Secord, 1972). This approach assumes that individuals act under the powers of their own agency and thus emphasizes self-directed and self-monitored social behaviors. These behaviors in turn are assumed to be explicable in terms of a widely accepted body of rules that lend meaning to them. The principle research technique employed is that of the ethnomethodologist (Garfinkel, 1967) which involves the obtaining of accounts, that is, the actor's own statements about why certain acts were performed and what social meanings were attributed to them. By analyzing these accounts, the rules that underlie social behavior are discovered. Therefore, the

advantage of ethogenics is that it reveals the skills necessary to competently interact with other persons in a given cultural context and does this by examining the actor's explanations of his everyday behaviors using ordinary language. While the ethogenic approach has much to recommend it, it has not gone without its detractors (cf., Schlenker, 1977).

Closely allied with the ethogenic approach is a paradigm referred to by Ginsburg (1979b) as situated action. Sharing the assumption that people are active agents whose actions are guided by reasons as well as by environmental causes, this paradigm additionally assumes that understanding of action necessarily requires an understanding of the situational context in which it is embedded. Significant features of situations include availability of goals, patterns of roles and rules, prescribed and proscribed behaviors, physical props, and the skills and knowledge necessary to successfully interact with others. Also stressed is the view that coordinated action among people rests on a shared framework of meanings that themselves are the product of human activity. As with the ethogenics approach, situated action relies on the solicitation and analyses of verbal accounts as a source of evidence concerning the meanings and rules within which action can be made intelligible. Ginsburg identifies certain implications that this paradigm has for the conduct of social psychology, including a focus on action settings, a diminution of laboratory experimentation, increased use of film and video technology, and role playing simulations.

Other alternatives to conventional social psychological research and

practice have also been proposed in recent years. Among these are Gergen's (1978b) generative theory, Moscovici's (1972) admonishment to seek out "dangerous truths," and Sampson's (1978) distinction between Paradigm I and Paradigm II science. Let us briefly consider each of these.

As part of a continuing critique of contemporary social psychology, Gergen (1978b) has argued that a commitment to the positivist orientation has hindered the development of generative theory, that is, theory that would challenge people's common conceptions of the world and suggest new alternatives to serve as the impetus for constructive social action. Among reasons Gergen offers to adopt this approach are the contention that social theory is inevitably biased on ideological grounds (Habermas, 1971; Horkheimer, 1972), as well as the often-acknowledged lament that despite the large number of carefully conducted experiments, few, if any, highly reliable propositions have emerged. By accepting these arguments, then, the generative theorist is free to examine a broader set of ideological components than are available in present theory and is unencumbered by the immediate necessity for verification.

Numerous benefits may be anticipated by recognizing the utility of generative theory. It would release social psychology from its attachment to duplicating common sense and preserving the status quo; its use would focus attention on the valuational biases that are implicit in current social theory; promote the flexibility of the culture to meet adaptive challenges; heighten awareness of the scientists' role in shaping

the existing social order; and expand our knowledge of the range of human potential as different researchers explore social phenomena from competing value positions.

Voicing a sentiment similar to Gergen (1978b), Moscovici (1972) contends that for social psychology to attain the status of a proper science, it must go beyond the verification of common sense and the systematization of what is already known. Instead, social psychology must postulate entirely new concepts--dangerous truths--that would transcend the given views of a culture and explore new realities in an attempt to stimulate social progress. Social psychologists must be willing to participate in societal experiments and to take on the added roles of social critic and political advocate. Failing this, Moscovici maintains that social psychology will remain a secondary enterprise busily engaged in the clarification of minor issues.

Lastly, Sampson (1978) has distinguished a naturalistic model of science (Paradigm I) that seeks abstract, general, and universal truths from an historical model (Paradigm II) in which truths appear in concrete, situated and particularistic forms. Whereas Paradigm I implicitly embodies traditional values such as Protestantism, individualism and competition, Paradigm II explicitly recognizes the linkage between scientific knowledge and dominant social values. Although the ahistorical and acontextual approach of Paradigm I continues to dominate our discipline, Sampson urges that a fuller perspective on human behavior can be obtained only in the presence of a paradigm shift wherein the historical model

gains parity with the naturalistic model.

Summary and Implications

The purpose of this essay has been to explicate the distinction between "working with" and "working on" theories. A convenient way to view this distinction is to link the former with matters of verification and the latter with matters of explanation. The distinction between verification and explanation (discovery) in science has not gone unnoticed by social psychologists and some theorists have recently incorporated this perspective into their work. For example, Gibbs (1979) notes the difference between experimental verification of self-evident hypotheses which he refers to as "hypothesis-confirming" research and the discovery of novel relationships which he terms "hypothesis-forming" research. Moscovici (1972) describes social psychology as predominantly a "science of appearances" in which primary effort is directed toward systematizing existing knowledge and distinguishes this from a "science of effects" in which creative endeavors are channeled toward postulating entirely new concepts.

Although it may be tempting to view the distinction between "working with" and "working on" theories as implying incompatible approaches to the conduct of social psychological inquiry, we share both Sampson's (1978) and Gibbs' (1979) sentiments as to the desirability of establishing a synthesis between the two orientations. In seeking this synthesis one possibility would be to let the nature of the problem dictate the orientation. Gergen (1973) has suggested that social phenomena may be viewed along a continuum of historical durability with certain phenomena

more susceptible to sociohistorical shifts than others. For example, social behaviors with a physiological basis (pain avoidance, emotional arousal) may be relatively more enduring, whereas most acquired dispositions (achievement striving, persuasibility) are likely to be more transient. Given this, those phenomena that occupy the more durable end of this continuum might appropriately be studied within the context of "working with" theories, whereas those phenomena that are more sensitive to historical flux might be better examined within the framework of "working on" theories.

Rather than letting the nature of the problem dictate the orientation, Gibbs (1979) has recently described research that utilizes both approaches in what he terms "ecologically-oriented inquiry." While preserving the features of manipulation and control inherent in conventional practices, such research asks questions that are not tied to single contexts, avoids mere demonstrations of self-evident knowledge and is concerned with the meanings that subjects attach to experimental situations. In this way, Gibbs hopes to achieve an interplay between the goals of both verification and discovery.

Granting the desirability of a synthesis, there nevertheless exists strong resistance to "working on" theories. As a matter of fact, increased calls for transition in the coming years may rigidify social psychology still further. Both Sampson (1978) and Westland (1978) suggest that a likely reaction to continued criticism of standard research practices will be a heightened reactive posture characterized by

increased demands for loyalty and an exaggerated defense of scientific philosophies acquired early in individuals' careers.

Reluctance to "working on" theories is undoubtedly further contributed to by the increased complexity that this approach entails. A scientific approach that is sensitive to sociocultural definition will of necessity be more complex than one in which these influences are disregarded. That valid social theories will unavoidably be more complex is exemplified by Thorngate's (1976) impostulate of theoretical simplicity. Briefly stated, it is impossible for any theory of social behavior to be simultaneously general, simple, and accurate. Although the conventional approach with its high priority placed on internal validity has sought simple and accurate explanations at the expense of general ones, Thorngate concludes that valid social theories are attainable only by elevating their level of complexity.

Acknowledging the failure of laboratory experimentation to capture the complexity required by valid explanations of social behavior, some have called for purely technical solutions such as increased use of field experiments (Bickman & Henchy, 1972) or more sophisticated multivariate designs (McGuire, 1973). In our view this reflects an all-too-frequent tendency to address questions of substance by transforming them into questions of method. The inadequacy of this solution is indicated by Baumgardner (1977) who notes that attempts to modify conventional social psychological research by offering technical alternatives may be largely irrelevant in that they fail to address the sociohistorical assumptions

upon which the research is founded.

In a broader sense the imbalance between "working with" and "working on" theories that prevails in social psychology reflects the reward structure that characterizes our academic discipline. Wachtel (1980) has recently identified pervasive influences that discourage theoretical inquiry, including the failure to appreciate temperaments and talents among particular researchers that would enable them to contribute to theoretical development, an unfortunate preoccupation with quantitative rather than qualitative research productivity, and an overreliance on the experimental method as the mark of progress in psychology. Owing to the preponderance of these influences, social psychologists continue to be encouraged to be productive rather than inventive. As Wachtel (1980) remarks, one can easily think of a list of successful social psychologists whose reputation rests on publishing empirical studies whereas there are precious few examples of success among those whose work is exclusively theroetical. Even those who have achieved some recognition as theorists have also done extensive empirical work.

The priority that this places on "doing" rather than "thinking" has caused some to judge the situation serious enough so as to warrant a temporary moratorium on journal publication with the hope that energies spent previously on data collection will now be rechanneled into conceptual analysis. One such plan first offered by Condry (1973) and subsequently reiterated by Wachtel (1980) would award grants to researchers for not publishing in certain years, much as farm subsidies are used to prevent an

oversupply of certain crops. In an earlier suggestion to halt data collection, Moscovici (1972) argued that since we have subsidized our empiricism by a dearth of theory, this debt should be repaid by encouraging theoretical development unfettered by the requirement of immediate verification. Though some may find these notions unconventional or, perhaps, even outrageous, the fact that several prominent observers have made such proposals is indicative of the serious nature of the problem.

While we obviously share a deep concern about the priority given to data collection relative to conceptual analysis, our advocacy of "working on" theories is not intended to suggest that experiments should no longer be done, that the hypothetico-deductive method should be scrapped, or that data collection should be abandoned. To the contrary, it is recognized that there is a symbiotic relationship between theory and data inasmuch as both are vital elements in the scientific enterprise. To encourage theoretical inquiry apart from empirical work would be as misguided as it has been to rely on research in the absence of theory. The solution lies not in supplanting one orientation with the other, but in offsetting the relative inattention heretofore paid to theoretical endeavors. In proposing the distinction between "working with" and "working on" theories, we have attempted to redress this imbalance by pointing out the shortcomings of overdependence of the former and by proposing some ways to proceed with respect to the latter. Admittedly, "working on" theories will require a major shift in the primary activites of many persons actively engaged in social psychological research. However, it is anticipated that scholarly

effort thus redirected will engender a flexibility that will contribute to an enriched understanding of social life.

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